

Cultures of Neutrality – Nasserism and its Discontents

Joel Gordon

The 1996 film *Nasser 56* is a nostalgic look backward to a time when Egypt held a place of stature in the developing world, when Egyptians were proud of their country, confident in their leaders, and looking toward a better future. The film chronicles the lead up to the decision to nationalize the Suez Canal Company in July 1956, the operation to secure control over the waterway and – in somewhat brisker narrative – the breakdown of international diplomacy that predated the Anglo-French-Israeli ‘tripartite aggression’ of the following October. (JG 2000)

The star of the film is the Rayyis himself, played by the late film star Ahmad Zaki. *Nasser 56* ends with a defiant speech from the pulpit of al-Azhar, the thousand year-old center of Islamic theological training. As bombs rain on Cairo, Gamal Abd al-Nasser tells his people in a message broadcast over state radio that their country remains defiant. Egypt will never surrender.

Throughout the film, Nasser has been an admirable, even enviable character, a humble yet gigantic presence, everything and anything one might seek in a ruler. He is modest in personal taste, incorruptible, approachable to the common man or woman, patient and judicious under the most trying conditions. Nasser studies his country’s options as Western support for the Aswan High Dam is withdrawn. He delegates trusted advisors – men of *khibra* (experience) and *thiqa* (trustworthiness) – to analyze international law and organize a mini-coup to seize company offices and installations. He reads intently, scrutinizing maps and studying history and law, as if engaged in a chess tournament.

The film retains a special place in the canon of Hollywood on the Nile, as the first endeavor to recreate the life and career of the man who did so much to shape independent, postcolonial Egypt – actually the first full-blown political biopic since a treatment of early nationalist hero Mustafa Kamil that was produced prior to, but only screened after the 1952 Free Officers coup. (JG 1999) A series of bio-dramas, films and televised serials, have followed, most by now tired rip-offs. But at the time, the film created a firestorm, setting box office records (since broken by less interesting fare) and prompting a popular reexamination of the Nasser era and the man who gave it his name.

The film was funded by the state at a time of serious national fragmentation, political and sectarian violence, as a call to recall civic solidarity. Nasser 56, after all, recounts a moment in which virtually the entire nation stood united, even many who had been displaced by the Free Officers consolidation of power and nascent social revolution. Recalling the moment, however, invariably meant recalling the man, and officials in the Radio and Television Union balked. Fearing suddenly that Nasser's charisma, as depicted, might well reflect poorly on present leadership, they held the film from circulation for nearly a year. In the end the project, which had been heavily advertised, and which had played to an enthusiastic assembly of media artists and critics, could not stay on ice.

The story starts on June 18, 1956, the first anniversary of Britain's evacuation from the Canal Zone. Nasser takes down the flag in a ceremonial recreation; afterwards he speaks to the assembled crowd. Several scenes later, the story shifts to Brioni, Tito's summer residence – the script dates the scene as July 19, a week before nationalization – where Nasser flew to meet with the Yugoslav leader and India's Nehru. As scripted, Nehru and Nasser walk together in the gardens.

Nasser: I think that our goals are realistic.

Nehru: That is what worries me, Mr President.

Nasser: But why?

Nehru: The west will never remain silent about us, for a number of reasons, including the fact that power is always jealous of other power.

Nasser: They do not have much option.

Nehru: Nor do we. (Nehru stops and points to a flower) It can't grow enclosed in a fortress. The east is the east and the west is the west.

Nasser: You are the one who says that....

Nehru: I studied in England, so did Gandhi. But I say the east is east and west is west. And unfortunately the two will never meet. (MAR 17)

A few scenes later Nasser and Nehru fly together to Egypt. In the air Nasser receives official word that the western powers have withdrawn their offers to finance the High Dam. Nasser reads the memo then, looking distressed, hands it to Nehru, who is sitting to his left, in the window seat. In the screenplay Nehru reads the letter with interest, also displaying dejection. In the film he turns to Nasser and asserts, 'No end to their aggression.' (MAR 26-27)

Although he has accompanied Nasser to Cairo, Nehru promptly vanishes from the narrative. In reality he left for home the next day, and as far as I know it remains unclear whether or to what extent the two leaders discussed Nasser's new predicament. The Indian leader's presence has, however, served as a key symbol for viewers, at least those in the know, of Egypt's place in the non-aligned movement and Nasser's reign as leader of the Arab world and, for a time, the African bloc. The film's scenarist, Mahfuz Abd al-Rahman, the leading author of historical dramas in Egypt and, arguably, the Arab world, set out deliberately to provide a history lesson. In striking manner, his film follows a classical narrative, both in what it signifies and what it chooses to skim over.

Bandung and Beyond

The Conference of Non-Aligned Nations, held in Bandung, Indonesia in April 1955 remains a significant moment in Nasser's personal rise to local, regional, and international predominance. It was by all accounts a rite of passage. Nasser, according to the conventional accounts, shared the stage with world luminaries like Nehru, Sukarno, and Chou En-Lai – 'treated by them as the leader of the Arab world, Nasser was afforded an enormous prestige-building opportunity.' (KB 115)

Emboldened by the warmth of their greeting (especially Chou, who invited him to a private dinner), Nasser returned home to take on the Baghdad Pact (including Nehru's northern antagonists, the Pakistanis), and secure an arms deal with the Czechs, effectively thumbing his nose at the West's reluctance to fill his order in the aftermath of Israel's devastating February 1955 raid on Gaza. To his closest colleagues and fellow conspirators the Bandung trip remained pivotal in terms of their professional and inter-personal relationships with Nasser. After he returned he was no longer Gamal; they all referred to him as Rayyis (chief, boss) or, more formally, Mr President. (JG/1992 189; JJ 65-66).

At the same time, the classic chronicles, whether written during his reign or in the spate of popular biographies that followed his untimely death in 1970, the Bandung meeting rates little more than this cursory, matter-of-fact, taken-for-granted, treatment. None covered his involvement in any depth. This is especially surprising, in retrospect, with regard to all of the books written during the late 50s and early 60s, when the ideals proclaimed at Bandung and successor meetings – especially the 1961 Belgrade conference, the 'high-water mark of the Bandung movement (TL 224) – resonated with such power. The only detailed treatment I

know of, by Rami Ginat, is based on Indian national archives. Ginat traces the meeting in terms of Nasser's growing relationship with both Nehru and Tito. And whereas most schematic accounts of the Bandung meeting reflect classic cold war biases, Ginat provides the perspective of the Indian delegate, who noted Nasser's 'moderation, charm, and real ability to handle tricky diplomatic situations such as those which frequently arose in the Sub-Committee set up to draft the resolution on human rights. He presided over this Sub-Committee with marked distinction, discretion and ability,' a far cry from the 'flamboyant fashion of a military dictator' that some expected. (RG/2005 111)

There are questions that remain, and perhaps should be addressed if this has not already been undertaken. What was the United States position really regarding Nasser's participation at the non-aligned summit? According to Miles Copeland the Americans initially encouraged Nasser to attend Bandung. State Department area officers drafted position papers and furnished background briefings on Indonesian politics and "what to expect from Chou en Lai and the Communists" that were translated into Arabic (187). US Ambassador Henry Byroade told the Lacoutures, who did not doubt his sincerity, that his government was 'very satisfied with Nasser's conduct at Bandung. He did not allow Chou En Lai to cast a spell over him. He agreed to sign a resolution favouring "a peaceful solution to the Palestine problem" and he contributed towards defining an independent stand to both communism and colonialism.' (J/SL 223) But more recently Ginat has argued that Nasser resisted American pressure to not attend Bandung. The Americans took umbrage at the decision taken at Bogor, Indonesia in December 1954 to not invite Israel to attend Bandung, and were displeased at the invitation to the Peoples Republic of China to the exclusion of Taiwan. The Americans targeted Egypt as the bell weather of Arab sympathies; if Egypt stayed away, they felt, so would the other Arab states. (RG/2005 90)

Three Musketeers

In thinking – very much out loud – about Bandung, non-alignment, positive neutrality and Afro-Asian solidarity movements, and thinking about the relevant citations in Nasser 56 I am drawn to consider Nasser's relationships with both Nehru and Tito.

Nehru's ties to Egypt long predate the July 23, 1952 Free Officers coup. In 1931 he visited Cairo and met with Wafdist chief Mustafa al-Nahhas. Nehru adopted a 'consistent pro-Arab stance,' particularly with regard to Palestine, from the mid-40s onward. He supported Egypt's unilateral abrogation of the Anglo-Egyptian treaty, signed in 1936 by Nahhas and scrapped by the same chief minister of the last Wafd government. Concurrently he cautioned

Egypt about nationalist ambitions to extend sovereignty over the Sudan. In the aftermath of the July 1952 coup, the Indian prime minister established amicable relations with Muhammad Nagib, the Free Officers' front man. The two met when Nehru visited Egypt in late June 1953, within a week of the revolutionary regime proclaiming Egypt a republic and anointing Nagib as its first president. A year later he expressed disappointment when the Revolutionary Command Council, now clearly led by Nasser, dismissed Nagib. He viewed the Anglo-Egyptian agreement of October 1954, prelude to full British evacuation, with suspicion. The regime seemed to be waffling between nonalignment and linking itself more closely to the United States – very much a correct reading of the situation. And he was not alone in reading Nasser's manifesto, *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, published in late 1954, as an immature work (RG 2005/85-95; JG/1992 188).

The following year marked a change in attitude. In mid-February 1955 Nehru re-visited Egypt and as a result began to re-visit his take on Nasser. He remained skeptical of Egypt's proclaimed neutrality, especially with regard to opposing the Baghdad Pact. But a little over a week after his departure Israel staged its raid into Gaza and the picture began to shift. The raid shook Nasser and, among other things, strengthened his resolve to attend the Bandung meeting. Nasser stopped in New Delhi on his way to and from Indonesia, meeting both times with Nehru. The latter may well have looked upon Egypt's leader as a work in progress. Miles Copeland claimed that Nasser disliked Nehru's preaching (MC 186). But the sermons seem to have had an effect. Nasser turned increasingly to Nehru for advice, and Nehru, for his part, found his confidence in Nasser 'gradually enhanced.' By the time Suez came to a boil the two had established a genuine rapport. Nehru, at least, referred to Nasser as 'a good man and trying his best to overcome' 'corruption and being bought up by foreign powers.' (RG 2005/113-15)

'The Bandung Conference of 1955 and the political philosophy of Mr. Nehru had lifted President Nasser's pragmatic neutrality to the nobler and more difficult search for a middle way in world affairs, and if in practice he was compelled to do some bazaar bargaining with the Powers, this did not alter the fact that non-alignment was the guiding principle of his foreign policy. He admired Tito as a neutral within communism and Nehru as neutral within the British Commonwealth, and sought to model his policy on their kind of independent action. There was already within the national movement, with the exception of the Pan-Islamic wing, considerable sympathy for Nehru and the Congress Party because of its long struggle for the independence of India, culminating in the creation of a powerful independent

state in Asia; the movement had always avoided an alliance with Pakistan despite the fact that it was a Moslem country. Nasser had also found Nehru a firm ally against the Baghdad Pact. (TL 224)

Nasser's relationship with Tito appeared on the surface even stronger. The two met first in early February 1955, prior to Nehru's visit to Cairo. Tito was on his way home from India and stopped over at Nehru's behest. He and Nasser had a mammoth seven-hour meeting while Nasser took the Marshal on a voyage through the Suez Canal. Copeland says that Tito treated Nasser better than Nehru, speaking to him 'as a younger equal. (MC 186) Nasser met with Tito more than any other foreign leader, twenty-two times between 1955 and 1970. (KB 119) He was vacationing at Brioni in July 1958 when he learned of the Iraqi revolution. Anthony Nutting credits Tito with teaching Nasser the 'golden rule' of neutrality: 'maintain all possible contacts with both sides' (AN 117)

It is surprising in this respect that Tito makes no appearance in the film, Nasser 56, even if he stands in the shadows – the script contains nine scenes set in Yugoslavia. He is there in some documentary footage, but otherwise off screen.

Mohamed Hasanein Heikal, Nasser's Boswell, referred to the troika as the 'three musketeers' (so 'Nasser' is the real answer Slumdog Jamal should have given in 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire'). Again, it is frustrating how the two drop in and out of the classic chronicles of Nasser's life:

Tito advises Nasser, as do the Indians, to grant concessions to the Suez Canal Users Association. (AN 160-61) ... '... other friends, such as Tito and Nehru, had advised him to make yet another effort to resolve the issue...' (AN 194) ... '... after consulting with Tito and Nehru' Nasser condemned forthrightly the Soviet decision to resume nuclear testing (AN 279)

In latter years the relationship with both soured somewhat. Nehru died in 1964 'deeply disillusioned' with Nasser for failing to publicly condemn Chinese aggression against India in 1962 and only making 'private remonstrances' to Chou En-lai. Tito found it 'incredible' that Nasser did not denounce the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. It left the Yugoslav leader 'bitterly disappointed' and Nasser's 'closest political friendship outside Egypt came abruptly to an end.' (AN 456-57)

Then and Now/Other Voices

If Bandung made Nasser an international third force VIP, it was of course Suez that put him in a league of his own. Nasser 56 is, after all, a far cry – and a world away – from Nasser 67. To what extent did Nasser's Egypt adhere to the principles laid out at Bandung? East and West might never meet, but Egypt's pendulum swings between American and Soviet poles – Eastern financing of the High Dam and the Helwan steel works, Western Food for Peace and economic assistance for the salvation of Abu Simbel, the crackdowns against leftists and promulgation of the Socialist Decrees, the power shuffles between Ali Sabri (pro-Soviet) and Zakaria Muhyi al-Din (pro-US) – all point to a commitment to pragmatism, punctuated at times by vituperative calls to 'drink from the sea' that might well be considered non-alignment. Or, is this dual alignment, a failure, as Nehru had feared in late 1954 to choose a true neutral path? Or is it, as Tom Little suggested in 1967, on the heels of the June War, classic self-interest at play.

Little, who described non-alignment as 'the nobler and more difficult search for a middle way in world affairs,' concluded that non-alignment is 'weak because it gives an excuse for avoiding decisions; on the principle that they stand neutral between the world powers, nonaligned nations avoid moral verdicts, to which their philosophy should commit them, for purely selfish reasons.' For him the final test was the Chinese aggression against India. 'In almost every case, including those states which supported Nehru, the uncommitted nations committed themselves in accordance with their own interests and in so doing they destroyed the "third force" they thought they had created at Belgrade.' (TL 224-25) This sentiment was echoed more forcefully by Barun Mitra, head of the New Delhi based free market oriented Liberty Institute, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Bandung:

'The world has moved a long way since 1955. Before attempting to revive the dead, maybe it would be worthwhile to assess the aftermath of Bandung 1955 and apply lessons learnt there to Bandung 2005. After all, when history is repeated, it usually turns out to be farce. Throughout the five decades, the Neros behind Bandung 1955 merely fiddle as one country after another went up in flames. Bandung 1955 was stillborn, and needs to be cremated. If a phoenix could rise from the ashes of 1955, articulating the real aspirations of the people for a better world, recognising political liberty, protecting property and economic freedom, and nurturing democratic institutions, then the work may truly have an occasion to commemorate Bandung 2005.' (indianexpress.com)

My work has to this point focused primarily upon the Nasserist intelligentsia, including those

who converted to Sadatism in the 1970s. One of the last Nasser stalwarts, survivor of the left's love-like relationship with the revolution, Mohamed Sid Ahmed, had a very different take on the fiftieth anniversary:

'... can the spirit of Bandung be revised in the context of a new and very different world order from the one that prevailed in 1955? Today any state has only one of two options: either to be with the United States or against it. How can Non-Alignment exist in such a unipolar world? As we have just highlighted, it cannot be assumed that all people in a society can be assimilated in the North. Bandung, which is identified with the South, underscores that the representatives of the South fight on to survive and cannot be eliminated easily. One advantage of identifying with the south is to depend on oneself, to oppose depending on others... ultimately to become self-reliant.' (MSA 2005)

Egypt remains in many respects a Manichaean society, trapped between the Nasserist and Sadatist hard core, the die hards for whom the other is evil incarnate. Nasser 56 prompted, inevitably, a Sadat film, one that was, by comparison, a true biopic, spanning his years from young hotheaded cadet up to his assassination in October 1981. The Sadat role also went to Ahmad Zaki, although his personification of this charismatic figure was described more as impersonation than a deep character study. (JG 2002)

There have, however, always been other voices, other takes on the great questions facing the Egyptian nation. What about the Islamists who suffered so greatly under Nasser then reemerged under Sadat, who lead the opposition today and who would probably sweep to power if real elections were held? Is there an Islamist take on nonalignment?

I do not have a clear answer to this question. The Muslim Brothers from the 1930s onward supported Arab – and Muslim – causes in Palestine and elsewhere, and founded branches in neighboring countries. Similar to Nasserist pan-Arabism, whatever pan-Islamic, or pan-Islamist dreams the Brothers harbored were always seconded to more immediate national contexts. Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb et al were in their own way Egyptian patriots.

Banna wrote: 'If by it the propagandists for patriotism mean love of this land, attachment to it, sentiment toward it, and affection toward it, it is something anchored in the very nature of the soul, for one thing; and for another, it is prescribed by Islam.' He approved of liberation struggles 'to free the land from its ravagers,' the patriotism that reinforces 'the bonds which unite individuals within a given country, and even the patriotism of conquest that 'Islam has already ordained.' Very much focused on the ills of Egyptian liberalism, he decried as 'counterfeit patriotism' the type of factionalism in the name of the nation that produced

‘mutual throat-cutting, hatred and vituperation, hurling accusations at one another’ to further ‘self-interest.’ And he made sure to conclude by noting that the Brothers ‘define patriotism according to the standard of creedal belief,’ whereas others define it ‘according to territorial border and geographical boundaries.’ (CW 48-50)

The Brothers took a lead in the anti-colonial armed struggle against the British occupation, particularly during the guerilla campaign waged with tacit government support following Egypt’s abrogation of the 1936 treaty. Brotherhood leaders agreed to lend their support, if needed – it was not – to forestall any British troop movement toward the Nile Valley in the aftermath of the July coup. Ever after, Brotherhood apologists would assert that all of the arms stockpiled were destined solely for British targets. Although the bulk of their philosophical debate focused on the West, the Brothers also took keen interest in developments in the East. Banna had spoken in passing about ‘Easternism’ (al-sharqiyya); during the emergent Cold War the Brothers debated the extent of their loyalty to or solidarity with the Afro-Asian bloc in the absence of a ‘Muslim bloc.’ The Cold War, in effect, provided an opportunity for Islam to emerge as an alternative path to both capitalism and communism. The Brothers remained wary of Western attempts to exploit their natural animosity towards the atheistic Soviet bloc. Sayyid Qutb, in 1951, articulated the notion that Western fear of communism might play into the Brothers’ hands, if the ‘oppressors’ and ‘exploiters’ could be intimidated into fostering an agenda of social reform. (RPM 270-71)

The Brothers, of course, were out of business in Egypt by the time of Bandung, arrested or chased out during the mass crackdown that followed their unsuccessful attempt on Nasser’s life in October 1954. Many who did not wind up in Nasser’s prisons found refuge in Saudi Arabia, from where, it is becoming increasingly clear, they played an active role in Saudi schemes, financed by Washington, to undermine Egypt’s position in the Arab and Muslim worlds, and perhaps even to assassinate Nasser. Individual Brothers may have broken crusty bread with and come to respect the sincerity of communist fellow-inmates. The most radicalized – some equate them with the most brutalized – came to decry Egypt as an apostate state. Those operating in a ‘semi-underground’ manner in Saudi Arabia clearly, however cynically, threw their lot in with the West. Distrusted yet tolerated by the Saudi regime, they spread their influence throughout society, particularly via the universities. (RD 122-38)

Pictures at a Back Alley Exhibition

This may explain the very different historical take on non-alignment that I encountered purely

by accident on a meandering walk on Roda Island in Cairo a few years before the release of Nasser 56. The site was a back wall of Egypt's largest public hospital bordering a secluded stretch of walkway along the Nile that had once been pointed out to me as a lovers' lane where young men and women, suitors or married couples, could catch a few minutes of privacy from the helter-skelter of the metropolis. The sketches, in chalk, were striking for both their complexity and cleverness, and clearly bore an Islamist imprint. The artist was good – I like to think of him (or her) escaping from a boring government office to really let loose. (JG 1997)

Two panels consisted entirely of Quranic verses, invocations of God, and the names of the Prophet Muhammad and the four Rightly Guided caliphs. A third depicted then Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir with his arm cradling the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, a dual symbol of Islam and Palestine. Two other panels depicted Nasser in scandalous caricatures. Both relate directly to – and comment ruthlessly upon – the neutralist agenda.

In one Nasser wears a pointed turban that I take to be a dunce cap (*tartur*) and a brassiere. He leans on a club, in feminine pose, surrounded on each side by a dog, labeled the American and Soviet ambassadors. Both dogs sport top hats, the former right off the head of Uncle Sam, the second with hammer and sickle. They regale him as a 'blockhead' (*`igl*) and 'transvestite' (*khawwal*; variants include derogatory labels for homosexuals), and warn him, despite his club, to beware of a beating. To the side, a radio, labeled Voice of the Arabs (Nasser's influential, revolutionary propaganda instrument) announces an attack, a reference to June 1967. In the background, laughter is heard: 'ha, ha, ha....' The panel is titled 'When criminals bow before their lord/master' (*rabb*).

In the other Nasser, labeled Pharaoh, stands in classic 'Walk like an Egyptian' pose, wearing a sarong with his head in profile (and prominent nose protruding), and his arms out to either side, palms upward. In his left palm he holds three gallows, from which hang the bodies of 'executed Muslim Brothers.' Above are two religious invocations: 'They all seek refuge in the power of God' and 'Blessed is the nation that coerces its people.' On either side of Nasser stand two figures, their backs to the viewer as they stare across the Nile towards the pyramid and Cairo Tower. Somewhat recognizable by their garb, they are designated as Nehru and Tito – the latter cleverly anticipating internet slang is simply T2) – and 'leaders of the non-aligned nations.' Nehru, who holds an axe, stands astride the tree of the 'Arab nation,' each leaf designating a state. The trunk has been hacked at.

The symbolism evoked by the artist was startling for its diversity – I speak in past tense because the drawings were obviously viewed as transitory. The dunce capped, crossdressing Nasser plays upon cultural mores and, I guess, a bit of village satire. Dogs occupy a low position in the animal kingdom, and to be mocked or commanded by them is to grovel. Pharaoh, of course, recalls all the iconic majesty of the Rayyis, dam builder and captain of industry. But also the double charge of apostasy and tyranny leveled by Khalid al-Islambouli, the mastermind of Sadat's murder, who defiantly told the court 'I killed Pharaoh!' Nehru and Tito speak for themselves. I find it interesting that Nehru, the anti-colonial warrior, rather than Tito, the communist, wields the axe – and that he strikes against the trunk of the Arab nation and not the Muslim *umma*.

They stare across the river at the Cairo Tower, the ultimate symbol of Nasserist neutrality. According to the story – and I think we all by now accept it as fact – when Kermit Roosevelt, CIA troubleshooter/troublemaker par excellence, offered Nasser a hefty bribe, the Rayyis took the money and built his own lotus-like minaret, mosqueless, to tower over the city. The tower is an icon of the period, a place for lovers to meet in countless film melodramas. In latter years it has, like so much of Nasser-era Egypt, fallen into decay, more or less a discarded relic. No one visits the gardens that surround it anymore. The view from the top is still breathtaking.

The sketches remind us that Egypt remains a land with multiple historical narratives, and that for some at least, history does still count. By placing the tower next to the pyramids the artist is surely evoking more than the Nasser-era skyline; it smacks of royal hubris. The two fellow-musketeers, Pharaoh's Aristotles, gaze at it, probably with bemused approval. Pharaoh holds the gallows, from which dangle the martyrs.

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